

Elizabeth Plankinton House
1492 West Wisconsin Avenue
Milwaukee
Milwaukee County
Wisconsin

HABS No. WI-280

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410-MILWA
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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

ELIZABETH PLANKINTON HOUSE

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- Location: 1492 West Wisconsin Avenue (north side of West Wisconsin between North 14th Street and North 15th Street), Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin. Previously known as 1432 Grand Avenue.
- Present Owner: At this time the building is owned by the Redevelopment Authority, 734 North Ninth Street, and the land is in the ownership of Marquette University, Milwaukee.
- Significance: The Elizabeth Plankinton House is a Richardsonian Romanesque-inspired building built by pioneer meat packing magnate, John Plankinton as a wedding gift for his daughter Elizabeth. It is one of the last surviving mansions that once predominated the former Grand Avenue residential area.

PART 1. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners: The following is an incomplete chain of title to the land on which the structure stands. Reference is the office of the Recorder of Deeds, Milwaukee County.

1886	Warranty Deed, Book 280 page 340 Helen Kellogg to Elizabeth A. Plankinton
1896	Warranty Deed, Book 363 page 620 Elizabeth A. Plankinton to Margaret A. Johnston
1904	Warranty Deed, Book 508 page 123 Margaret A. Johnston to Butler J. and Marie M. Johnston
1910	Warranty Deed, Book 623 page 374 Butler J. Johnston to Columbus Institute of Milwaukee
1967	Deed, R 346-431 Charles F. Winter and Bernalee Winter Edwin Melvin LeVine and Lois G. LeVine to Redevelopment Authority of the City of Milwaukee

1975 Deed, R859-1296
Redevelopment Authority of the City
of Milwaukee
to
Marquette University

2. Date of erection: The house is assumed to have been constructed between 1886 and 1888. With the original building permit lost, this time frame is given in that Plankinton purchased the property in 1886 and that it is noted in the 1888 Rascher's Fire Insurance Atlas of the City of Milwaukee. The first illustrations of the residence appear in 1889 in both Along Grand Avenue, Milwaukee by Judson and Gordon; and in Milwaukee, published by S. L. Stein.
3. Architect: Unknown. Stylistic analysis by various local historians (i.e. M. Russell Zimmermann, Mary Ellen Young) attribute it to the body of work designed by Edward Townsend Mix, one of Wisconsin's foremost nineteenth century architects. Zimmermann seems definite in his claim here but does not cite his source; Young, an art history professor, also cites in the Wisconsin Inventory of Historic Places - Elizabeth Plankinton House - 10 December 1974 that Mix is the architect. It is peculiar that a house of this magnitude and an architect with an imminent reputation that no concrete records exist of its construction or design. The Local History Room of the Public Library has the Milwaukee Sentinel indexed through 1890. It is a competent and thorough research source, but there is not a single mention of the house as checked under various headings (i.e. John Plankinton, Edward T. Mix, Grand Avenue, etc.). All biographical information pertaining to Mix does not say anything about the house. He left the City in 1888 and died in 1890. If he did design the house it is probably his last major work in Milwaukee. It is with question if Edward Townsend Mix is the architect of the Plankinton House.
4. Builders and Supplies: Unknown
5. Original plans: Unknown

6. Alterations and additions: The Plankinton House has changed very little and still retains much of its original appearance. To its exterior a projecting stone balcony from the front porch was removed with the entry steps moved from the east arch to the west arch. A rear coach house was dismantled and the stone was used in the construction of the retaining wall which surrounds the property. Because the original building permit is lost it is assumed that these changes occurred before 1915, the permit's first entry. These alterations are evidenced by photographs taken in the 1890's which show the house in its original state. The interiors are largely in tact with portions of the first floor still in original condition. The second floor has been converted into meeting rooms with various woodwork elements still to be found. The third floor is all very much as it was. The basement has been completely remodeled for use as club rooms. The building permit file is extremely vague in specifying the alterations. Dates given for interior renovations are 1926, 1934, 1945, 1950, and 1963 with 1934 and 1963 in reference to the basement. In 1915 the Columbus Institute erected the two story rear addition designed by architects Brust and Phillip. Measuring 93 x 144 feet its principal use was an auditorium/gymnasium. The exterior design suggest that it is three stories but in fact, it is only two floors.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

1. John Plankinton (1820-1891) the original owner and builder of the house was not only a pioneer in the development and origins of the City, but a leader in establishing Milwaukee as once the foremost city west of Cincinnati in the meat packing industry. Born in Delaware, he came to Milwaukee in 1842 from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Within the same month of his arrival, he had opened an ordinary meat market. By 1849 he added slaughtering and packing to his business and in the following year established a partnership with Frederick Layton known as Layton and Plankinton Company. This business lasted for 10 years, upon which Layton retired and Plankinton continued alone until 1863 when Plankinton and Armour was formed. Phillip D. Armour retired in 1884 and the company was reorganized as John Plankinton and Company with Patrick Cudahy as his partner. In 1888 this firm was dissolved, with the Cudahy Brothers Company succeeding Plankinton and Company.

Elizabeth Anne Plankinton, John's only daughter by his second wife, continued in her father's tradition of philanthropy and was known as the "municipal patroness." Her gifts included the YWCA hotel for women, the bronze statue of George Washington which stands in the court of honor (West Wisconsin Avenue between North 9th and North 11th Streets), and the pipe organ in the Auditorium. She was to have been married to Richard Hamilton Park, the British sculptor of the above, but was deserted in favor of a dancer from Minneapolis. Totally distraught, she completely rejected her wedding gift house and was never to occupy it.

The house was vacant until 1896 when Mrs. Margaret Johnston purchased it for her residence. She was the widow of Hugh L. Johnston of Johnston Bros., a noted local baking and confectioners firm. She died in 1904. In 1910 it was acquired by the Knights to Columbus, Milwaukee-Pere Marquette Council. Founded in 1904 it is the oldest and largest council in the state. It served as their headquarters and club house until 1978.

2. West Wisconsin Avenue was originally a dirt road named Spring Street after the numerous natural springs which were once found along its length. Until the late 1840's when a high bluff near 8th Street was graded down, the upper and lower street did not connect, and it was necessary to go blocks out of the way to avoid this interruption. In the 1850's James Higson Rogers purchased 160 acres on western Spring Street and subdivided the land for sale. To encourage what he guessed would become a choice residential area for the city's wealthy merchants, Rogers built a \$60,000 mansion on 15th and Spring Street. He guessed correctly, and in the 1870's the street was lined with so many imposing mansions that it was considered necessary to give it a more appropriate name. Grand Avenue was chosen and remained the title until March 1, 1927 when it became West Wisconsin Avenue by ordinance of the Common Council.

C. Sources of Information

1. Old Views: Photographs of the house in original condition and form are at the Milwaukee County Historical Society, 910 North 3rd Street, Milwaukee, under iconography-file, "West Wisconsin Avenue."

2. Bibliography:

a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Common Council Ordinance March 1, 1927

Building permits and other records, 1915-71,
General Office, Building Inspection, 1010
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Office of the Recorder of Deeds, Milwaukee
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b. Secondary and published sources:

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by Judson and Gordon, 1889.

Anderson, W. J. and Julius Bleyer, eds.
Milwaukee's Great Industries, 1892, p. 184.

The City of Milwaukee and State of Wisconsin,
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Conard, L., ed. History of Milwaukee From Its
First Settlement to the Year 1895. Chicago
and New York: American Biographical Publishing
Company, Vol. II, n.d., pp. 12, 93, 301-02.

Erdmann, Biruta and Richard Cleary, "National
Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination
Form," Elizabeth Plankinton House, State
Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1975.

Martin, George Alfred, Wausau in 1900.

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Milwaukee City Directory. 1885-1911.

Milwaukee Journal, August 18, 1963

Milwaukee Journal, March 27, 1980.

Ogden, Marion G., Homes of Old Spring Street, 2nd Ed.,
Milwaukee, 1946, p. 19.

"Plumber Mansion," Pilot-Review, Friday, November 25, 1890. Wausau.

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Whithey, Henry F. and Elsie Rathburn. Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased), Los Angeles, 1956, pp. 423-24.

Young, Mary Ellen. "Elizabeth Plankinton House," Wisconsin Inventory of Historic Places, December 10, 1974.

Zimmermann, H. Russell. The Heritage Guidebook-Landmarks and Historical Sites in Southeastern Wisconsin, The Heritage Bank, 1976, pp. 129-32.

Zimmermann, H. Russell. "The Past in Our Present: Jilted by its Owner," The Milwaukee Journal (Home Section), February 18, 1968, part 7, pp. 1 and 14.

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Historic Preservation
Consultant
Department of City
Development,
Milwaukee
August 5, 1980

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: This structure is a Richardsonian building characterized by a picturesque disposition of forms achieved through bold, asymmetrical massing, articulation of surface with rough stone, and irregular fenestration. The irregular contours of the slate roof are agitated by chimneys and finials and contribute to the picturesque effect of the massing. The arched openings, polychromy, and carved ornament create a vigorous expression of Romanesque form which recalls Richardson's sculptural treatment of mass and his love of polychromy. The Plankinton House is a well crafted example of an architectural style that was popular among prominent businessmen in the late nineteenth century. Private residences of this scale are exceedingly rare in Milwaukee.
2. Condition of fabric: Still standing, the exterior is almost completely unspoiled with a great deal of the interior still in tact.

B. Description of the Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The house is a three-story building with basement and attic. It is basically square in plan with three separate projecting bays, a three-story conical turret, stone porch, porte-cochere, and attached solarium. The overall dimensions vary from a width of 51'4" to 58'10"; to a length of 66'4" to 73'8".
2. Foundation: Rockfaced Wauwatosa limestone.
3. Wall Construction: The walls are of rock-faced cream colored, random, ashlar Wauwatosa limestone. It is trimmed with richly carved buff sandstone, granite columns, terra-cotta tiles, and ornamental sheet metal work.
4. Structural framing: Masonry bearing walls.
5. Porches: The main facade, facing south, has a one-and-one-half story entrance porch with round arches on the first level and segmental arches above. Red, clay tile is the roofing material. On the east facade the porte-cochere, a square, flat roofed projection with round arched openings, springs from granite columns with foliated capitals. Other stone carvings and foliations adorn this element.

6. Chimneys: There are five limestone chimneys, four outside and one internal. The interior chimney is located in the west third of the house towards the rear. The exterior ones are each distinct in their own design. On the east elevation are found two, one rising out of the projecting bay which is almost lost in this element. The other follows along the line of the turret. The chimney on the west elevation is highly decorated with a full pediment, paired round arches, and the upper part of the stack suggests multiple pots. The stack on the north elevation is the only one that rises truly free and clear of roof line or element. At this time it is non-functioning.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance is a large double door which opens into the vestibule. Access from the inside is into the upper level of the front porch and to the third level of the turret. Two other exterior entries exist and are both bound on the east elevation, one opening from the porte-cochere and the other leading into the basement.
 - b. Windows: The majority of the fenestrations are double-hung wooden sash with large single lights. There are also numerous fixed sash which are high-lighted with multiple lights in the Queen Anne fashion. Of particular note is the angle window above the entrance porch of multiple light with center diamond lights and a red pan-tile roof. Round arched openings with stained glass are found in the projecting bay of the east elevation. Gabled double-hung dormers are found to the rear on east, west and south elevations.
8. Roof:
 - a. Shape: Steep hipped block with projecting gabled blocks. A three story turret rises from the south-east corner. The pinnacles are decorated with either cresting or finials.
 - b. Framing: Timber
 - c. Covering: Black slate

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: All rooms in the basement have been remodeled for club use when the Knights of Columbus occupied the house. The foundation walls where exposed are limestone, and the original interior walls, where exposed, are brick. Numerous partitions have been erected and all walls are covered with paneling. The ceilings have been replaced with acoustical tiles and the floors with indoor/outdoor carpeting. The room conversions resulted in club rooms, bar room, an industrial kitchen, restrooms, and phone booth. Two stairways, front and rear, lead upstairs. Exits to the outside are on both the east and west facades.
- b. First floor: A small vestibule leads through double doors into a large central hall which contains the main staircase, a fireplace and is formed in part by the turret and immediate area into a rather irregular space. The fireplace, elegant in proportion, has an opening in the shape of an Assyrian arch. It is surrounded by glazed tiles with the same in the hearth. The oak mantel with mirror over and surrounds are in keeping with the fine woodwork treatment as found through the foyer. To the west is the Men's Lounge, a rather oblong poorly proportioned room that extends about 2/3 of the length of the house. Again, two elegant fireplaces, one on the west wall, the other on the north wall; both with glazed tiles, elaborate maple mantels with mirror over and pressed metal fire boxes. The first has hearth seats on either side and is the finest one in the house. Proceeding beyond the staircase to the east of the central hall is the board room with the same pattern woodwork and decoration. Its shape is determined by the projecting bay. All of the rooms to the rear which were probably kitchens, pantries, and storage, have been remodeled for club use with little or nothing of the original existing.

- c. Second floor: The second floor is reached only by the main staircase and opens into a similar central hall. This hallway opens onto three bedrooms, one to the south, one to the east, and the other to the north. The south bedroom, which assumes the turret and contains a fireplace of lesser quality but with a finely carved hardwood mantel and surrounds, glazed tiles, and pressed metal firebox. It adjoins a library which is directly above and equal in size to the downstairs men's lounge. Access to this room is also through double doors from the hall. Interesting is that this room has been completely redone in English Arts and Crafts of the early 20th century. Stripped of almost all its Victoriana, it is a stark contrast to the rest of the house. The east bedroom assumes much the same space and form as the board room directly below it. The fireplace in this room, though of lesser quality, is very interesting with its Oriental stickwork design. The north bedroom (Women's Lounge), a non-descript space adjoins one of the two upstairs bathrooms. The other is accessed from the hall. A rear dog-leg stair leads to the third floor.
 - d. Third floor: A ballroom occupies an irregular space that opens onto hallways and other various rooms and closets. The ballroom assumes the angles of the roof line and does not appear to be a very accommodating space for a large number of people. A simple fireplace is found here. A turret room opens off the ballroom and is access to outside. The east meeting room contains another fireplace whose mantel is in a what-not type of configuration. A rear stair leads to the attic. The 16 by 6 foot skylight was presumed removed from the house in June of 1976 and sold at auction in California. Mozaic in design it contained 25,000 pieces of stained glass mounted in zinc and copper.
2. Stairways: The main staircase is an exuberant display of the woodcrafter's art. It is a finely detailed piece of oak panels, fans, and lattice work. At the foot of the stairs the newel posts are extended to the ceiling connected by a string course of springing arches. The stairwell is wainscotted with double newel posts on the intermediate landings. Other stairways are found to the rear of the second and third floors. The basement is reached by going under the main staircase. It is unusual that in a house of this size and from this period that only the main staircase transcends all three floors.

3. Flooring: With the exception of the ballroom, vestibule and bathrooms the floors are oak tongue-in-groove and covered with either linoleum tiles or all-weather carpet. The ballroom is parquet flooring with the vestibule and baths having ceramic tile.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Elegant oak wainscoting, spindle work, cornices, pilasters, and baseboards are found in the main entry hall and principle downstairs rooms. The oak ceiling in the entry hall is richly coffered with inlaid bronze reliefs. Of note in the downstairs parlor is the use of ogee arches in the trim. The second floor is as simple as the first is intricate and complex. The (unknown) hardwood woodwork here has been reduced to baseboards, chair rails and cornice treatments. The library does have an interesting plaster relief cornice. Other than where accoustical tiles or paneling has been placed during previous remodelings, the walls and ceilings are plaster on lathe.
5. Doorways and doors: Elaborate doors are found on the first floor which are richly paneled with some having bronze reliefs depicting scenes of Greek or Roman mythology. Doors on the upper floors reflect the simple treatment as found in the woodwork.
6. Hardware: All evident knobs and hinges are brass.
7. Lighting: Conversion to electric.
8. Heating: Steam.

D. Site:

The house stands on the original site as when it was built. The only out building was the coach house, which was demolished and the stone used in the construction of the retaining wall and is topped with a cast iron fence. All original landscaping is gone. Marquette University who owns the site has completely surrounded the house with various campus buildings. The lot to the west which is the vacation of North 15th Street between West Wisconsin and West Wells is vacant.

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PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This structure was recorded by the Redevelopment Authority of the City of Milwaukee in compliance with Executive Order 11593 and a Memorandum of Agreement with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation as a mitigative effort in the demolition of the Elizabeth Plankinton Mansion. John A. Burns, AIA was the HABS project coordinator. The records were prepared under the general supervision of Carl Reinhold, Assistant Director, Redevelopment Authority. Architectural measured drawings were prepared by Ken Lamers of the Redevelopment Authority. Photographs were taken by Lee Harvancik, (1979) Eileen Kehoe (1980) and Alan Magayne-Roshak (1978). The data was prepared for transmittal to the Library of Congress by Patricia L. Rowse, a historian in the HABS office, in September 1980.